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# Antheus' effect in the intergenerational transmission of attachment styles and its importance for adult education

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## Abstract

In ancient Greece, a little known myth tells us that Hercules could not defeat the feeble Antheus because the latter was continuously gaining strength from his mother, Gaea. According with this myth, our research was based on the assumption that there is an inter-generational transmission of empathy and attachment styles. In our investigation we involved 90 families (270 respondents), children and both their parents. The results confirm, in part, our hypotheses. Thus, the children's empathy and attachment styles are positively related to the empathy and the attachment styles of their parents. We will further discuss the importance of these findings for adult education.

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**Keywords:** attachment styles; empathy; inter-generational transmission; adult education; social change

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## 1. Trans-generational transmission of attachment and emotionality

In the middle of the last century, researchers in animal behaviour were surprised when they found that a baby chimpanzee perfectly developed physically and well nourished could get sick and even die if he lost his mother (Lawick-Goodall, 1985), and rhesus monkey orphaned babies would always prefer the secure comfort of a furry surrogate mother while refusing food (milk bottle) offered by a surrogate mother that could not offer emotional security (Harlow, 1971).

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Based on these findings, it was easy for Bowlby (1982) to notice the similarities between the child and the baby monkey to postulate the existence of complex links between mother and child, which he called attachment. Since in infancy, the attachment is manifested through cuddling, smiling, hanging, sucking etc., behaviours which fall in the category of unconditional reflexes, Bowlby was entitled to conclude that the attachment is an innate process. It could be defined as a complex set of relationships which developed between the mother and her newborn child, relationships that begin with sensations and perceptions the newborn relates to the mother and the vice versa, but also with sensations and perceptions of the mother regarding her baby.

Viewed through the prism of the Big Five and the Five Factor Model, attachment fits perfectly in the Neurosism factor, often called the stability - emotional instability axis. Attachment relationships between parents and children are imbued with affection and evidently belong to the affective manifestations in humans, (Laham, Gonsalkorale, and von Hippel, 2005, Kanat-Maymon, and Assor, 2009; Yoshida and Busby, 2012). As Goldberg used to consider the five factors of personality as being similar to a galaxy, we may infer from this that these relations cannot be in any way simpler and unidirectional, but as complex and contradictory as the emotions and feelings that characterize the human person.

Consequently, a number of researchers have focused on the transmission of the inter-generational negative aspects related to emotional attachments, (MacEwen, 1994, McGregor, and Elliot, 2005, Lev-Wiesel, 2007). In the context of more general observations regarding the clear link between parental depression and child psychopathology in general, and children depression in particular, parental depression was strongly labelled as a risk factor for children's vulnerability to depression. Psychological processes involved in depression were correlated with the dimensions of the attachment. Brenning, Soenens, Braet and Bosmans (2011) concluded that between some processes that characterize depressogenic personality (e.g. sociotopia and autonomy) and two of the attachment dimensions there is no correlation unless inside each generation, but the same attachment vulnerabilities with similar characteristics will occur when comparing mothers' depressive symptoms with the daughters'.

Moreover, in another study (Besser and Priel, 2005), other aspects of the same inter-generational similarity of depressive symptoms were discovered across three generations (grandmother, mother, daughter). Fear of failure, (Eliot and Thrash, 2004) or marital conflicts (Cui, Fincham and Pasley, 2008) also seem to be determined or at least influenced inter-generationally. That means, as bluntly as it might sound, that, overall, the patterns of negative affective experience (anxiety, depression), non-adaptive models par excellence, are very easily transmitted from parent to child.

Although less numerous than the studies focused on the negative aspects of transmission, there are enough studies that target the inter-generational transmission of positive emotional aspects that belong to or are closely related to attachment. Harwood, Hewstone, Paolini and Voci, (2004) maintain that the attitude that we build towards adults is influenced not only by parents, but also grandparents, while the research conducted by Soenens et al., (2007) focuses on the inter-generational transmission of empathic capacity.

Our research aims to contribute in supporting the theory of this process of inter-generational transmission of positive emotionality so that, in conclusion, we could emphasize the necessity of knowing the process for the special case of adult education, acknowledging the importance the support of family and loved ones has, as well as the impact of family educational backgrounds (Gatua, 2014) for adult involvement in long-term educational programs.

## **2. Research regarding the transmission of empathy and attachment styles from parents to children.**

### *2.1. The research objective*

We aim at determining to what extent empathy and attachment styles of children correlate with empathy and attachment styles of parents of feminine gender and male gender. We were also interested in finding whether there are gender differences in terms of empathy, in both children and parents.

### *2.2. Research hypotheses*

- there is a between generations transmission of empathy from parents to children, children's empathy correlating positively with parents' empathy.

- there is a between generations transmission of attachment styles from parents to children, children's attachment styles correlating positively with parents' attachment styles.

### 2.3. Participants

The research was conducted on a sample of 90 families, 270 subjects respectively, children and both their parents. Differentiated according to the variable group, the group of subjects includes 90 children, 90 mothers and 90 fathers. Differentiated in terms of biological gender, the group of subjects includes 38 boys and 52 girls. Differentiated according to the environment variable, the group of participants includes 48 families from urban environment and 42 rural families.

### 2.4. The research variables:

- dependent variables: children's empathy, attachment styles of children
- independent variables: maternal empathy, empathy in fathers, mothers' attachment styles, attachment styles of children. Invoked variables: biological gender- male, female.

### 2.5. Tools

- the questionnaire of measuring of emotional empathy designed by Albert Mehrabian. The questionnaire contains 33 items, whose response options were on a scale from 1-8 ("1 = do not agree" and "8 = agree"). Because the Cronbach alpha coefficient was initially low, we eliminated the items 3, 4, 18, 22, 24 and 33 and obtained a = 0.73.

- the questionnaire of attachment designed by Collins and Read (1990). The questionnaire contains 18 items with response options on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where "1 = strongly disagree" and "5 = strongly agree". Items are structured on 3 scales: *secure style scale* ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ) *anxious style scale* ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ) *avoidant style scale* ( $\alpha = 0.65$ ).

### 2.6. The steps of the research

The research was conducted between 2012- 2013, with help from the primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers who are students in the Department of Psychopedagogy of the Kindergarten and Primary School. These teachers applied the questionnaires to their learners (children) and to the parents of their learners (mother and father). The sample of subjects was set randomly.

### 2.7. Results

#### 2.7.1. Qualitative results

The qualitative analysis of the results the subjects got with regard to empathy in parents and in children highlights a normal distribution. With regard to differences of empathy in terms of biological gender, according to the results, there are no statistically significant differences in parents, [ $t(178) = 0.519$ ,  $p = 0.605$ ], (table 1).

Table 1. Gender differences in parents' empathy

Biological gender parents	Number of subjects	average	Standard deviation	T	p
male	90	117,43	16,63	-.519	.605
female	90	118,92	21,56		

In the same way, according to the results, there are no statistically significant differences in terms of biological gender variable in children, regarding empathy, [ $t(88) = 0.038$ ,  $p = 0.970$ ], (table 2).

Table 2. Gender differences in children's empathy

Biological gender children	Number of subjects	Average	Standard deviation	T	P
Masculine	38	118,39	17,57	-.038	.970
Feminine	52	118,23	21,91		

### 2.7.2. Quantitative results

a) intergenerational transmission of empathy from parents to children (table 3)

In order to check this hypothesis, we calculated the  $r$  Pearson correlation coefficients between the empathy of children, on the one hand, and the empathy of the mother and that of the father on the other hand.

- there is a statistically significant correlation, strong and positive, between the children's empathy and their mothers's empathy, ( $r = 0.615$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).
- there is a statistically significant correlation, strong and positive, between the children's empathy and the empathy of their fathers, ( $r = 0.539$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

b) intergenerational transmission of attachment styles from parents to children (table 3)

In order to check this hypothesis, we calculated the  $r$  Pearson correlation coefficients between the children's attachment styles, on the one hand, and the attachment styles of their mothers and those of their fathers. We further present the results that we got:

The secure attachment style

- there is a statistically significant correlation, weak and positive, between the secure attachment style of the children and the secure attachment style of their mothers ( $r = 0.293$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ).
- there is a statistically significant correlation, moderate and positive, between the secure attachment style of the children and the secure attachment style of their fathers. ( $r = 0.306$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ).

The anxious attachment style

- there is a statistically significant correlation, moderate and positive, between the anxious attachment style of the children and the anxious attachment style of their mothers. ( $r = 0.367$ ,  $p = 0.000$ )
- there is a statistically significant correlation, weak and positive, between the anxious attachment style of the children and the anxious attachment style of their fathers. ( $r = 0.252$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ).

The avoidant attachment style

- there is a statistically significant correlation, weak and positive, between the avoidant attachment style of the children and the avoidant attachment style of their mothers. ( $r = 0.232$ ,  $p = 0.028$ )
- there is a statistically significant correlation, moderate and positive, between the avoidant attachment style of the children and the avoidant attachment style of their fathers. ( $r = 0.353$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).

Tabelul 3. Intergenerational transmission of empathy from parents to children

Variables	Empathy-children	Variables	Secure attachment style children	Variables	Anxious attachment style children	Variables	Avoidant attachment style children
Empathy-mothers	$r = 0.615$ $p = 0.000$	secure attachment style - mothers	$r = 0.293$ $p = 0.005$	anxious attachment style - mothers	$r = 0.367$ $p = 0.000$	avoidant attachment style - mothers	$r = 0.232$ $p = 0.028$
Empathy-fathers	$r = 0.539$ $p = 0.000$	secure attachment style - fathers	$r = 0.306$ $p = 0.003$	anxious attachment style - fathers	$r = 0.252$ $p = 0.016$	avoidant attachment style - fathers	$r = 0.353$ $p = 0.001$

### 3. Conclusions and discussion

The current research started from the premise that there is a transmission from parents to children in terms of empathy and attachment styles and also that there are gender differences regarding empathy and self-disclosure/self-exposure.

The results partially confirm the hypotheses launched in the beginning. Thus empathy in children correlates strongly and positively with mothers' and fathers' empathy so, the higher the parents' empathy, the higher the

empathy in children, and vice versa, the lower the parental empathy, the lower empathy in children. At the same time, children's attachment styles correlate with parents' attachment styles. Therefore, there are positive correlations respectively, between the secure, anxious and avoidant attachment styles of children and the secure, anxious and avoidant attachment styles of mothers and of fathers.

We believe that we are entitled to claim that empathy has, beside an innate component, an important social component too, (...). Current research prefers to emphasize the mother's role in the transmission of empathic model (Soenens, Duriez, Vansteenkiste and Goossens, 2007), but our results highlight the role of the father. In other words, we believe that a strong correlation of child empathy, with both mother's and father's empathy, suggests that being empathic is learned at an early age and not necessarily within the family, both parents having an important role in transmitting an empathic model.

With regard to the relationship between attachment styles of children and their parents, we noticed that there are significant correlations in all cases, even if they are not very strong. We noted that motherly anxious style correlates better with the style of anxious children than does the same style of an anxious father. This result confirms the studies showing that the depressive style of the grandmother is passed on to the mother and through the mother to the daughter (Besser and Priel, 2005).

The results of our study may find relevance in adult education. The reintegration of an adult in the educational system is not easy. Many of the adults who need education and are included in educational programs, especially those living in countries with poor economy, belong to families that have passed anxious or avoidant attachment styles on to their descendants and, through them, deficient ways of adapting too, (Obegi, Morrison, and Shaver, 2004; Rholes, Simpson, and Friedman, 2006). So we can also explain the tendency of renunciation, of abandonment. It follows that, for the success of educational programs that aimed to produce successful adults, we must take into account important dispositional factors as well as self-esteem, and attachment styles which put us in direct connection with ways of emotional and social adjustment of subjects involved in the educational process (Chen, Liu, and Kaplan, 2008).

Therefore, as it is crucial for social change, adult education involves the making of a broad alliance bringing together both teachers, that is, psychologists and sociologists, and policymakers (Bowl and Tobias, 2012).

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